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King Assassination

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) -- A state prosecutor said he will investigate new claims of a conspiracy in the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., though he does not put much credence in them.

"We can either corroborate what they're saying or we can disprove it, maybe," John Pierotti, the chief state prosecutor, said Friday.

The claims, which have fueled news reports for the past week, were repeated Thursday on ABC News "PrimeTime Live" by Loyd Jowers, 67, a former Memphis businessman who says he hired a killer to murder the civil rights leader.

Jowers, who once owned a restaurant, Jim's Grill, near the murder scene, said the killer was not James Earl Ray, who confessed to shooting King in Memphis in 1968 and is serving a 99-year prison sentence.

Jowers said he was asked by a friend, former Memphis produce dealer Frank Liberto, to find someone to kill King. Liberto is now deceased. His widow has discounted Jowers' story.

Pierotti said his staff and the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation will look into Jowers' claims. He said he will not ask the FBI or the Justice Department to get involved.

Pierotti said he had no idea why Jowers, who appeared on the TV show with his Memphis lawyer Lewis Garrison, is coming forward now.

"I don't know what their reason is. I really don't have to know why. I just have to know either it can be substantiated or it cannot be substantiated," he told a news conference.

Garrison said Jowers is willing to talk with authorities, if given immunity from prosecution.

Pierotti said he will not grant immunity to anyone claiming to have taken part in a murder. He said he does not plan to interview Jowers unless his investigation indicates that is warranted.

Ray, a drifter and small-time criminal, was arrested in London two months after the murder and brought to Memphis where he entered the guilty plea in 1969.

He has tried often over the years to take back his guilty plea, contending he was set up by a man he know only as "Raoul."

Authorities say Ray shot King from the window of a rooming house near the Lorraine Motel, where King was staying while he helped

organize a strike by city sanitation workers.